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The Bad Seed

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Introduction

> In the decade the novel was published, juvenile delinquency began to be far more common, or at least more extensively reported and documented. Compared to earlier history, the idea of child crimes was a new phenomenon. A controversy about nature and nurture arose as psychiatric explanations were proposed for juvenile delinquency, with the debate being whether inborn tendencies ("nature") are more or less important than environmental factors ("nurture") in explaining deviant behavior.
> (Wikipedia "*The Bad Seed*")

The Bad Seed was William March's (1893-1954) sixth, final, and most successful novel. Published just months before his death in 1954, it went on to be adapted to a long-running Broadway play (1954-55), a 1956 film adaptation using much of the original Broadway cast, and finally a 1985 television movie.

A highly decorated World War I soldier and successful shipping company executive, March was very interested in psychology, and many of his novels and short stories had what critic Clifton Fadiman called "psychological acumen". His first novel, *Company K*, consisted of a series of psychological sketches of men under the pressure of war. These sketches portrayed soldiers subjected to the extreme conditions of war. As such, we could view *Company K* as a study of "normal" human behavior when subjected to quite "abnormal" conditions. *The Bad Seed*, on the other hand, is just the opposite: a study of "abnormal"

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behavior under "normal" conditions.

As mentioned in the quotation above, there was a controversy in the 1950s over the relative importance of "nature" and "nurture" in juvenile delinquency. The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, I'll review the story as presented in the novel *The Bad Seed* and consider just what stance it takes on the nature-nurture issue vis-à-vis child crime. Second, I'll outline the historical context of the nature-nurture debate. Finally, I'll discuss why William March's premise concerning Rhoda was at odds with the prevailing views of human behavior in post-war America.

The Novel

The Story. *The Bad Seed* is the story of eight-year-old Rhoda Penmark, who had recently moved with her family—her father Kenneth and her mother Christine—to a port city in the South.[i)] Kenneth worked for a shipping company, and, during almost all of the events covered in the novel, he was in South America on company business. This left Rhoda and Christine together in the first-floor apartment of an "apartment house [which] consisted of three floors of ponderous Victorian elegance." (March 10) Sharing the apartment house was the widow Mrs. Monica Breedlove, a good-natured busybody whose views on the human psyche serve as a counterpoint to the central thesis implied by the novel's title.

Rhoda was, to all outward appearance, the perfect child—a child to make any mother proud. She was invariable polite. She diligently studied, practiced the piano, kept her room tidy, and dressed neatly (if a little bit quaintly). She was such an ideal child that Christine "wondered from what source the child had inherited her repose, her neatness, her cool self-sufficiency." (March 6) Her one flaw seemed to be that she could be overly possessive and covetous of the possessions of others.

When the Penmarks arrived in their new home, they placed Rhoda in the Fern School, a highly recommended private school run by three sisters who espoused a less than egalitarian attitude toward society and education: "While we advocate the democratic ideal, we are convinced that such an ideal is possible only where all members of a particular group come from the same level of society, preferably a high one." (March 21) One of the traditions of the Fern School was to hold a ceremony at the end of the school year during which various prizes and awards were given: "At the very end, the most important prize of all, in the minds

of the pupils, was given: the gold medal awarded annually to the child who showed the greatest improvement in penmanship during the school year." (March 8) Rhoda had set her sights on being the recipient of that year's penmanship medal. Since Rhoda was a diligent and conscientious student, she felt that the medal should rightly go to her. Unfortunately, at the awards ceremony Rhoda discovered that the medal had been awarded "not to herself but to a thin, timid little boy named Claude Daigle." (March 8) Her mother and Mrs. Breedlove tried to console Rhoda by pointing out that the medal was not awarded to the student with the *best* penmanship, but rather the student with the *most improved* penmanship. This failed to placate her, and she remained inconsolable.

Each year on the first Saturday of June the Fern School held a picnic "among the oaks of Benedict, the old Fern summer place at Pelican Bay." (March 3) It was at this picnic that Rhoda attempted to right the injustice done to her. On the bus, "Rhoda moved from her seat and took possession of one nearer the little Daigle boy. Her eyes were fixed steadily on the penmanship medal, but she did not speak at all." (March 28) Throughout the bus ride Rhoda badgered Claude, asking to touch and hold the medal. One of the Fern sisters later reported:

> "She became so insistent," said Claudia Fern, "that I finally had to take her by the arm and make her sit by herself, up near the driver—as far away from Claude as I could get her. But even then she twisted her neck around and looked at the medal the whole time." (March 61)

When the buses arrive at Pelican Bay, Rhoda continued to hound Claude, chasing him down the beach and out onto an old wharf.

Back at the apartment house, Christine and Mrs. Breedlove heard the news on the radio: Claude Daigle, the only child of Mr. and Mrs. Dwight Daigle, had been killed at the Fern School picnic. His body had been found wedged among the old pilings at the wharf. There were bruises on his forehead and hands, but even more mysteriously, the announcer continued, "Only a few days before, the little Daigle boy won a gold medal at the closing exercises of the Fern School. He was wearing the medal when last seen, but when his body was discovered, the medal was not found." (March 45-6)

A week later Christine received a letter from the Fern School, which said, in brief, that there would be no room for Rhoda in the school for the fall term. When Christine visited the

school, Octavia Fern stopped short of accusing Rhoda of anything specific involving Claude's death, vaguely saying, "Our complaint is that Rhoda is evasive, and didn't tell us the whole truth. We feel she has knowledge that she's told nobody." (March 64-5) She concluded by saying, "We feel that Rhoda is not a good influence on our other pupils." (March 65) Although Christine became very suspicious of Rhoda's actions at the picnic, when she talked to Rhoda, she had a clever explanation/lie for any point the Fern sisters raised concerning her actions. Christine "had little doubt that Rhoda had worried the Daigle boy, or that she had tried to take the medal from him in the woods, even though the child had denied these things with such earnestness." (March 67) Finally, she concluded she would stand by Rhoda:

> She was not trying to justify her child, for she could not condone the things the child had done; she was only saying to herself that matters were not so bad as she had feared. Rhoda was her child, and she loved her. It was her duty to protect the child, to make every allowance for her, to give her the benefit of every doubt. (March 67)

However, when Christine discovered the penmanship medal hidden in Rhoda's room and confronted Rhoda, Rhoda again weaved a series of straight-faced lies about why she had the medal. Christine again chose to believe that Rhoda was not, in fact, directly responsible for Claude's death. This would finally change when she witnessed something with her own eyes.

The janitor at the Penmarks' apartment house was a man named Leroy Jessup. He was a little educated man who felt himself put upon by his position in life. He thought of himself as intellectually superior to all around him, but his 'intelligence' consisted principally of an animal-like cunning. He was attracted to the strangeness of Rhoda, and he enjoyed trying to 'get a rise' out of her in any way he could. When he heard the news of Claude Daigle's death, he immediately began to tease Rhoda mercilessly, intimating that she was the one responsible for Claude's death. He suggested that Rhoda had hit Claude with a stick and that, when the police found the stick, they could prove by the blood traces that it was the murder weapon and that Rhoda had wielded it. In fact, Rhoda had used her cleated shoes to strike Claude, and after Leroy began talking about the stick and blood traces, she threw the shoes into the apartment house incinerator. Leroy noticed she was no longer wearing the shoes, and in the ensuing conversation it came out that she had thrown them away. She was, in fact, as much as admitting that she had killed Claude. Leroy jokingly said that he had retrieved them from the incinerator and would give them to the police to check for blood. When Rhoda

demanded he return the shoes more and more insistently:

> . . . he went to the front of the house, where he was sure she would not follow him. He stood under the camphor tree alone, saying to himself in amazement, "I really believe she killed that little boy!" He was afraid of the child. He came to work next day determined to avoid her; to his relief, she did not come into the park that morning; but looking up from time to time, he saw her at her window. All that morning, he was conscious that she followed his movements with her eyes, her head turning from side to side; and once, looking up quickly, their glances met. He turned uneasily away, aware of the unconcealed fury, the cold, calculating anger in the little girl's face. (March 181)

It was Leroy's habit to take a nap on a makeshift bed of newspaper and excelsior[ii] in the basement of the apartment house. That afternoon, just after Rhoda had bought ice cream from the ice cream truck, Christine saw her take three big kitchen matches from the box above the stove. What followed removed any doubts that Christine may have had about the guilt or innocence of her daughter:

> Mrs. Penmark had moved to the kitchen window to watch, wondering what the child intended doing with the matches she'd taken; she did not have long to wonder, for Rhoda, looking cautiously from side to side to see that no eye observed her, went, her face bland and innocent again, to the basement door. She paused at the door and struck one match on the cement wall, shielding the flame with her palm. She disappeared for a moment from her mother's sight as she went on tiptoes into the basement room. When there, she stooped quickly and touched the match to the excelsior and piled papers of Leroy's makeshift bed. She came out of the basement quietly, closing the door behind her. She slipped the flimsy bolt that held the door shut when wind blew, and banged it about; then, sitting again in her original place, she nibbled her ice-cream stick, the burned match still held in her disengaged hand. (March 182)

Leroy died from burns suffered in the ensuing fire.

Having witnessed Rhoda murdering Leroy, Christine could no longer harbor any doubts as to Rhoda's guilt or innocence. She was at a loss to understand why Rhoda was the way she was, and, under the pretense of doing research for a murder mystery she was considering writing, she investigated past serial murderers. To her dismay, this research lead her to the discovery that Christine herself had been adopted and was, in fact, the daughter on one of the most infamous serial murderers of them all, Bessie Denker—a woman who was responsible for a long series of murders for profit. Christine concluded that she herself had passed along a 'bad seed' from her mother Bessie to her daughter Rhoda. That 'bad seed' then was the reason for Rhoda's excessive possessiveness and lack of empathy/emotion. It was, in the end, the reason she seemed inevitably driven to murder anyone who either threatened her safety or stood between her and what she desired.

Christine decided that the only way to stop the murders and eradicate the 'bad seed' was to kill both Rhoda and herself. She managed to trick Rhoda into taking a lethal dose of sleeping pills, and then, seeing that Rhoda had passed out, Christine shot and killed herself. Mrs. Breedlove discovered Christine's body and managed to get Rhoda to the hospital in time to save her. The novel ends with these unknowingly ominous words spoken to Mr. Penmark, who had returned for the funeral:

> "You must not despair, Mr. Penmark, and become bitter. We cannot always understand God's wisdom, but we must accept it. Everything was not taken from you as you think. At least Rhoda was spared. You still have Rhoda to be thankful for." (March 205)

March's Theory. March is not subtle in his view of the cause of Rhoda's aberrant behavior. Indeed, the title says it all—*The Bad Seed*. Rhoda's overwhelming obsession to possess certain objects and her propensity toward violence are viewed as hereditary 'gifts' from her grandmother, the serial killer Bessie Denker, which had been passed on to her through her mother Christine. Christine, on realizing for a certainty that Rhoda is, indeed, a murderer, first searches within herself for how she has gone wrong in raising Rhoda. Her first attempt to understand, in other words, defaults to the conventional wisdom of the day—that a child is shaped by her environment. It is only after Christine reads about her own mother, Bessie Denker, that she understands the source of the evil within Rhoda—the hereditary 'bad seed' that was passed from grandmother to grandchild through an asymptomatic mother.

March's theory met with some resistance by critics. August Derleth of the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* wrote, "*The Bad Seed* would have been a stronger novel without this false premise—the granddaughter of a murderess is no more likely to be a murderess than the granddaughter of a seamstress, or anyone else." J.H. Jackson of the *San Francisco Chronicle* thought, "Marvelously as all this is told, there is one weak spot in it; not all readers will accept the author's putting the whole load on heredity—on the 'bad seed' that has skipped a generation and appeared again." These critics were reflecting the prevailing theories of the times as they related to the nature- nurture debate. The following section will introduce the history of this debate.

Nature and Nurture

> The phrase **nature and nurture** relates to the relative importance of an individual's innate qualities ("nature" in the sense of **nativism** or **innatism**) as compared to an individual's personal experiences ("nurture" in the sense of **empiricism** or **behaviorism**) in **causing** individual differences, especially in **behavioral** traits. (Wikipedia, "Nature versus Nurture")

To what extent are our behaviors, personalities, talents, intelligence, etc. set at the time of our birth and to what extent are these things acquired or learned? The tendency to define human behaviors and qualities in terms of "nature" and/or "nurture" has a long history. While it is true that some attempts have been made at synthesis, the majority of historical figures who have something to say about this are generally classified as supporting one argument or the other. It is also true that at many points in history one of these arguments has tended to hold sway in the intellectual/scientific views of the time.

History. We can trace the tendency to classify human qualities as stemming from either nature or nurture all the way back to the Greeks:[iii)]

> Plato argued that experience was simply insufficient to account for all the knowledge and abilities humans possess. Because these things cannot be taught, they must instead be present at birth, that is, they are innate. On the other hand, Aristotle, Plato's student, might have been the first empiricist, more precisely, possibly the first epigeneticist. (Goldhaber 14)

During the 17th and 18th centuries the debate about nature and nurture tended to be more philosophical than scientific. The philosophies of John Locke (1632-1734) and Jean-Jacque Rousseau (1712-78) illustrate this:

> Locke's philosophy is often equated with seeing the child as a "blank slate" onto which knowledge and morals are written. Although his views aren't quite so absolutely environmental, they nevertheless reflect a role for experience clearly consistent with a bias toward nurture. Rousseau, on the other hand, saw children coming into the world as endowed with goodness. The proper role for the environment then is to leave the child alone and the proper role for parents is to shield the child from the evils of experience. (Goldhaber 14)

Of course, the roots of the modern debate over nature and nurture can most readily be found in work of Charles Darwin (1809-82). His theory of evolution has had a tremendous impact of our comprehension of development. "As profound as Darwin's ideas were, however, he actually had little to say specifically about the relative importance of nature and nurture." (Goldhaber 15) He simply posited heritable traits that were subject to change over generations in response to the environment.

Nature and Eugenics. It was Darwin's cousin Francis Galton (1822-1911) "who saw in a theory of evolution a way to differentiate nature from nurture and then to ascribe what for him was the rightful importance of each." (Goldhaber 15) He was the first "to see the roles of nature and nurture as distinguishable and perhaps of greater importance to the debate, as existing as oppositional forces, each competing to influence development." (Goldhaber 15) Galton viewed nature as the clear winner. Importantly for the social impact of the nature-nurture debate, he considered evolution to be a ladder, "with different species occupying different rungs on the ladder." (Goldhaber 15) The higher the rung, the more 'advanced' the species were considered to be in evolutionary terms. Even more importantly, Galton viewpoint could be extended to apply to groups within species; thus giving us the rationale for "social Darwinism"—

> I PROPOSE to show in this book that a man's natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world. Consequently, as it is easy,

> notwithstanding those limitations, to obtain by careful selection a permanent breed of dogs or horses gifted with peculiar powers of running, or of doing anything else, so it would be quite practicable to produce a highly-gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations. I shall show that social agencies of an ordinary character, whose influences are little suspected, are at this moment working towards the degradation of human nature, and that others are working towards its improvement. I conclude that each generation has enormous power over the natural gifts of those that follow, and maintain that it is a duty we owe to humanity to investigate the range of that power, and to exercise it in a way that, without being unwise towards ourselves shall be most advantageous to future inhabitants of the earth. (Galton 1)

Galton was proposing eugenics. As stated by the famous anthropologist Franz Boaz:

> The possibility of raising the standards of human physique and mentality by judicious means has been preached for years by the apostles of eugenics, and has taken hold of the public mind to such an extent that eugenic measures have even found a place on the statute books of a number of states, and that the public conscience disapproves of marriages that are thought bound to produce unhealthy offspring.
>
> The thought that it may be possible by these means to eliminate suffering and to strive for higher ideals is a beautiful one, and makes a strong appeal to those who have at heart the advance of humanity. Our experiences in stock and plant breeding have shown that it is feasible, by appropriate selection, to improve the breed in almost any direction that we may choose: in size, form, color; and even in physiological functions, as in the rapidity of development, in fertility or mentality. It is, therefore, more than probable that similar results may be obtained in man by careful mating of appropriately selected individuals-provided that man allows himself to be selected in the same manner as we select animals. We have also the right to assume that, by preventing the propagation of mentally or physically inferior strains, the gross average standing of a population may be raised. (Boas 4)

This theory had a tremendous influence of social policy in many parts of the western world. "The result of the eugenics movement in England, the United States, and elsewhere was the establishment of laws allowing for the forced sterilization of those deemed less fit and laws against miscegenation." (Goldhaber 17) Galton's views were mainstream during much of the last half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th. They influenced ideas such as IQ, which was supposedly the measure of innate intelligence. IQ could be more than just an interesting number; it could also drive public policy and determine laws. Based on the results of IQ tests administered to immigrants at Ellis Island, which found "that 83% of the Jews, 80% of the Hungarians, 79% of the Italians, and 87% of the Russians were feeble minded" (Goldhaber 19), national origin quotas were established for immigrants which greatly curtailed immigration from southern and eastern Europe.

There were, of course, two sides to the eugenics coin. On the one hand, there was the attempt to limit the propagation of the less genetically desirable elements of society—the weak-minded, the structurally unsound, the mentally/psychologically unbalanced. On the other hand, there was the idea of actually breeding humans like stock animals to create a superior form of human being. Both of these aspects of eugenics saw their ultimate realization in Hitler's Germany during the 1930s and 1940s.

The Logical Extreme. When the Nazis came to power in Germany, their ultimate goal and rationale for action became a desire to purify the German *Volk* and provide it with enough *Lebensraum* ("living space") to prosper. Underlying all of this was a Darwinian view of the "survival of the fittest" with regards to race. As part of the attempt to purify the German *Volk*, both aspects of eugenics—eliminate the weak/undesirable and breed for the strong/desirable—came into play. First was elimination of the weak/undesirable.

From the time the Nazis took control of the German government, they set out to weed out the less desirable in society:

> On July 14, 1933, the new government issued its "Law for the Prevention of Progeny with Hereditary Diseases." This law was far more directive than the Weimar government's plan. People with so-called hereditary illnesses had to be sterilized, even if they objected. And the list of persons classified as hereditarily ill included those suffering from congenital feeble-mindedness, schizophrenia, manic depression, hereditary "epilepsy,

> Huntington's chorea, hereditary blindness, hereditary deafness, and serious physical deformities." People with chronic alcoholism could also be sterilized. The law established some 200 Genetic Health Courts at which teams of lawyers and doctors would subpoena medical records in order to choose candidates for sterilization. The Court proceedings were secret, and the decisions could rarely be reversed. . . In the six years before World War II, the Nazi doctors sterilized some 400,000 people, mostly German citizens living in asylums. ("The Nazi Eugenics Programs")

However, simple sterilization wasn't enough:

> By the late 1930s, the Nazi government was using propaganda movies to persuade the public that those who were hereditarily ill and, therefore, dangerous to the health of the nation should be exterminated rather than kept alive as 'neutered beings.' The targets for extermination were objectified as 'beings of lesser worth,' 'life unworthy of life,' 'ballast existences,' 'useless eaters.' And finally, In the autumn of 1939, Hitler approved the Aktion T-4 program, which authorized specific doctors and officials to carry out mercy deaths—euthanasia—of those the state deemed unworthy of life. ("The Nazi Eugenics Programs")

These forced sterilization and euthanization programs within Germany itself were little more than warm-ups for the Holocaust.

Holocaust is "from the Greek word *holokauston*, meaning "sacrifice by fire," and refers to the Nazis' persecution and planned total slaughter of all Jewish people in Europe." (Bergman[iv] 575) The targets of the Holocaust were not limited to Jews:

> In addition to murdering Jews, the Nazis used Darwinian-inspired eugenics to justify the removal of several other "inferior races" and groups from the human gene pool. The categories the Nazis judged as "sub-human peoples" included Slavic peoples (especially Poles and Russians), Gypsies, Asiatic and Mongolian races and the disabled. These peoples were labeled racially inferior and less evolved, and, consequently, were claimed to have a genetically corrosive influence on society. (Bergman 575)

The buildup to the Holocaust was a slow, but inexorable process. On April 1, 1933, the Nazis announced a boycott of all Jewish-owned business. "The first major formal step that would lead to the Holocaust was the Nuremberg Laws, passed on September 15, 1935, that began to exclude Jews from public life by the force of law. These laws stripped German Jews of their German citizenship and of all the rights of citizenship." (Bergman 649) These laws also outlawed intermarriage between Germans and Jews, so as not to pollute the Aryan genetic pool with 'inferior' Jewish genes. Further anti-Jewish laws followed, which, for example, excluded Jews from parks, fired any Jews with civil service jobs, required that Jews register their property, forced them to hand over precious metals to the government, reduced pensions, suspended driver's licenses, confiscated weapons, etc.

In the beginning there was an attempt to force Jews to emigrate, but when it seemed clear that other nations would not accept them, tactics changed: Jews were placed in concentration camps and, in many cases, murdered. This was the "Final Solution", i.e., the Holocaust. The actual Holocaust was thought to have begun in 1938:

> During the night of November 9, 1938, the Nazis incited a pogrom (a mob attack directed against a minority group characterized by killings and destruction of their property) against Jews in both Austria and Germany. This pogrom is now termed, "Kristallnacht" or the "Night of Broken Glass" because the windows of many Jewish-owned businesses were broken, showering the streets with glass. This night of violence included the pillaging and burning of close to 300 synagogues and massive looting of an estimated 7,500 Jewish-owned stores and shops. Thousands of Jews were also physically attacked, almost 100 were murdered, and approximately 25,000 to 30,000 were arrested and sent to concentration camps, mostly to Buchenwald. (Bergman 663)

When the war began, Jews were forced into ghettos and from there they were transported to camps. "Although all Nazi camps are often referred to as "concentration camps," some camps were extermination camps, others labor camps, prisoner-of-war camps and transit camps. While concentration camps were designed to work and starve prisoners to death, extermination camps (also known as death camps) were built for the sole purpose of rapidly and efficiently killing large numbers of people." (Bergman 727) The Germans perfected methods of mass murder that used poison gas. Jews were not the only ones forced

into these camps. Other "inferior races", such as the Slavs, suffered a similar fate. The generally accepted figure is that 11 million people (6 million of them Jews) were killed in the Holocaust.

The Holocaust was just one aspect of Nazi Germany's eugenics program; its goal was to eliminate bad/inferior 'bad breeding stock'. There was another side to the program:

> In December 1935, Heinrich Himmler established the infamous *Lebensborn* homes to help accomplish the Nazi goal of achieving a superior human race by deliberate racial selection. The Lebensborn's two main goals were numerical quantity and racial quality, two somewhat antagonistic ideals. Its "ultimate goal was to develop a racially superior stock, in accordance with pseudoscientific notions" of eugenics. . . . The Lebensborn was no small project. In the nine years it was in existence, about 12,000 children, close to half illegitimate, were born in its fifteen homes. (Bergman 5728)

In truth, the *Lebensborn* was nothing less than a breeding program, which was envisioned to produce the "Master Race". The ideal parents for the program were selected using over twenty

> . . . characteristics, including the applicant's height, standing and seated; the shape of the skull, face and forehead; color and location of the eyes and distance between them; length, breadth and curvature of the nose; length of arms, legs and body; color, growth and quality of body hair; skin color; back of the head, cheek-bones, lips, chin, eyelids; thorax (male applicants), pelvis (female applicants). In addition to all this, the SS man's bride had to be able to provide evidence that neither she nor her parents suffered from any physical or mental disease. Also she had to submit to an examination by SS doctors to make sure she was not sterile. Finally, provided she overcame all these hurdles, she had to produce a family tree showing there had been no Slavonic, let alone Jewish, blood in her family since 1750. (Hillel and Henry 31)

We can see, then, that Hitler's eugenics program, from the Holocaust to *Lebensborn*, took the concepts Galton's Social Darwinism to their ultimate, logical extremes. The results shocked the world. One of the results was that nature-based Social Darwinism lost favor and

it was largely superseded by the theory that came to be known as Behaviorism.

Nurture. While Social Darwinism and the concomitant field of eugenics can be seen to represent the "nature" side of the nature-nurture debate, the theory of behaviorism falls on the "nature" side. Edward Thorndyke's (1874 – 1949) law of effect (using reinforcement to strengthen behavior) was an early precursor, but John Watson (1878 – 1958) "is generally credited with being the founder of modern behaviorism and of demonstrating the importance of both classical and instrumental conditioning."[v] (Goldhaber 20) In short, the behaviorist model, as championed by Watson, and later Skinner, held that "all behavior are either reflexes produced by a response to certain stimuli in the environment, or a consequence of that individual's history, including especially reinforcement and punishment, together with the individual's current motivational state and controlling stimuli. Thus, although behaviorists generally accept the important role of inheritance in determining behavior,[vi] they focus primarily on environmental factors." (Wikipedia "Behaviorism") Behaviorism was largely experimentally based. As such, it tried to understand human behavior, and learning in particular, through carefully controlled experiments. These theories and experiments dealt with such things as "patterns of reinforcement, punishment, extinction, differentiation, and discrimination" (Goldhaber 51), but underlying all of these was the basic tenet that positively reinforced behavior was encouraged and negatively reinforced behavior was discouraged. It further posited that, for all practical purposes, a person's limits were determined by the patterns of positive and negative reinforcement in the environment. Of course, these patterns could be incidental—early childhood experiences and/or socio-economic niche—or intentional —formal education or training. To a large extent, there was a belief that the incidental could be overcome by the intentional.

Conclusion

Throughout, the last half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, there was healthy scientific debate over the relative validity of the two views of human behavior, intelligence, and potential. The 'nature' side of the debate held that inborn, hereditary factors predominated, while the 'nurture' camp believed that environment reigned supreme. To a large extent, by the end of World War II, the well had been poisoned, and rational debate was no longer feasible:

Two factors perhaps served to, if not end the classic nature–nurture debate

> of the first 30 or 40 years of the twentieth century, then at least put it in remission. The first was the political events taking place in Europe in the 1930s that eventually led to the events of World War II. Hitler's racist doctrines and the Holocaust that followed from these doctrines quickly led to the end or suspension of discussions of certainly eugenic thought but more generally of any nativist sentiment. At the same time, behaviorism was emerging as the dominant theoretical influence in American psychology. Although it is always hard to pinpoint a reason for significant paradigmatic shifts, the rise of behaviorism, both in the traditions of Skinner and of both Hull and Spence in the 1940s, and its dominance through the 1950s and 1960s probably, to one degree or another, reflected Americans' growing sense of ourselves as the society that really can do anything it sets its mind to doing. After all, many no doubt believed that it was the United States that virtually alone won the war and saved democracy. This positive attitude no doubt was also reflected in the growing civil rights movement of the period. All of these events together seemed to lead us as a society to increasingly look at what could be rather than what is, that is, to increasingly look to nurture rather than to nature and to spend less time concerned with sorting and classifying what were seen as stable and enduring traits and capacities and more time creating the social structures that were now seen as creating equal opportunity for all. The Great Society and the great intervention projects such as Project Head Start clearly reflected this optimism, this belief that the inequities in a society do not reflect genetics but rather reflect social structures that existed to benefit the few at the expense of the many. (Goldhaber 49-50)

To return to the original reception of William March's *The Bad Seed*, it's clear that March's theory of a child criminal whose criminality was genetically predetermined ran contrary to the prevailing views in post-war America. When considered in the historical context of the nature versus nurture debate, this was perhaps inevitable.

【Notes】

i) The port city is thought to be modeled on the city of Mobile in William March's home state of Alabama.

ii) Highly flammable softwood shavings used as packing material for fragile items.

iii) "Neither Plato nor Aristotle apparently actually used the terms "nature" and "nurture"; that honor goes to Richard Mulcaster in the year 1582." (Goldhaber 14)

iv) Kindle file—numbers equal Kindle "location" numbers rather than page numbers.

v) Watson is (in)famous for his "Little Albert" experiment in which he demonstrated a conditioned response when he showed eleven-month-old Albert his favorite white mouse and simultaneously struck a steel bar. Poor Albert quickly learned to respond with fear whenever he saw his formerly favorite mouse.

vi) There is a wide range of views within the Behaviorist camp concerning heredity. The extreme view of Behaviorism views humans as coming into this world something like Locke's "blank slate". Others take a more measured stance. What the behaviorists have in common, though, is the belief that human behavior is largely malleable based upon the behavioristic mechanisms.

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